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SUBJECT: Upcoming Elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Rheinland-Pfalz

REF: a) Berlin 3671, b) 04 Frankfurt 5551

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¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Voters in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz will go to the polls in March, the first state election test for the "grand coalition" government in Berlin. Most observers expect that both state governments will win reelection. Rheinland-Pfalz Minister-President (M-P) Kurt Beck (SPD/Social Democrats) has fared well despite the party's turmoil at the national level. Baden-Wuerttemberg SPD challenger Ute Vogt, in contrast, has come under heavy fire for her role in the resignation of former national SPD chairman Franz Muentefering (ref A). END SUMMARY.

B-W CDU/FDP Coalition Confident of Re-Election

¶12. (SBU) For Baden-Wuerttemberg (B-W) Minister-President Guenther Oettinger (CDU/Christian Democrats) -- who took office in April 2005 -- the March elections will be his first important test. Political observers say that the state's present CDU/FDP (Free Democrat) coalition is likely to win re-election. Both CDU and FDP representatives have told us that by March, the electorate will not yet feel the full effects of painful reforms on the national level, limiting the potential protest vote against the CDU. Moreover, with a grand coalition in Berlin, SPD candidates will be constrained in attacking the CDU-led state government.

¶13. (SBU) The state's FDP leadership, encouraged by their strong showing in the national elections, are confident they can repeat their third-place showing. The party has overcome last year's leadership crisis when both FDP state ministers had to resign in a corruption scandal (ref B). The FDP's new standard-bearer, Justice Minister Ulrich Goll, is increasingly popular. FDP General Manager Olaf Bentlage told us that after the election, Goll will claim a more influential portfolio such as interior or education.

B-W SPD Falls Further Behind; Greens Consider New Partners

¶14. (SBU) The Baden-Wuerttemberg SPD -- seldom a leading force within that conservative state (it trailed the CDU by 12 points in 2001) -- has fallen further behind as a result of Vogt's controversial role at the national party. During the recent SPD leadership quarrels, Ute Vogt voted for left-wing candidate Andrea Nahles (whose nomination to be Secretary-General prompted Muentefering to resign as party chairman). Afterwards, Vogt pleaded publicly that "if I had known the consequences, I would have decided otherwise." Vogt's perceived waffling angered state caucus members, two of whom told a Consulate representative that the party would have ousted Vogt if it did not face an election in five months. M-P Oettinger and others openly questioned Vogt's leadership qualifications. While Social Democrats are busy with damage control, the pragmatic state Greens have again signaled that they would consider a coalition with the B-W CDU (if the CDU and FDP do not win a majority). Leading Green politicians say privately that they are convinced a broad-based coalition would work under the liberal-leaning Oettinger.

Rheinland-Pfalz: M-P Beck Stands Tall in Berlin Crisis

¶15. (SBU) The recent leadership turmoil within the national SPD has had positive repercussions for Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P) Minister-President Kurt Beck, who also serves as a deputy party chairman at the national level. In coalition negotiations and in the wake of Muentefering's resignation, Beck emerged as a prominent party figure nationally. In Karlsruhe, the national party elected him "first" deputy chairman with an impressive 92.2% of the vote. At the November 12 state convention in Ludwigshafen, Beck received 99.5% as standard-bearer for state elections. Beck is popular and leads the only SPD/FDP coalition in Germany; both SPD and FDP representatives are upbeat regarding their accomplishments and the functioning of their coalition. The FDP are likely to remain in coalition with the Social Democrats, according to observers. A new obstacle for Beck will be the emergence of the Left Party (which polled 5.6 percent state-wide in September Bundestag elections).

16. (SBU) The R-P Christian Democrats enter the campaign with state and caucus chairman Christoph Boehr again as standard-bearer (following internal party wrangling in which no serious challenger emerged). In contrast to Beck's high approval rating, Boehr has limited popularity within the party and electorate even in relatively conservative Rheinland-Pfalz (in Bundestag elections this year, the CDU edged out the SPD within the state). To win in March, Boehr will need to disprove critics who say he lacks the charisma to edge out Beck.

17. (SBU) The R-P Greens enter the campaign from a weakened position -- having lost power at the national level and facing competition from the new Left Party -- and see little prospect of outrunning the FDP or entering state government. M-P Beck has never campaigned for a red-green coalition at the state level, an additional handicap. The party's official goal is to match the 6.9 percent it received in 2001 (the Greens' best showing ever), but a state party leader confided that Greens would be happy to poll six percent.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The March elections may serve as a first, albeit very early, barometer for the grand coalition. Re-election in Rheinland-Pfalz would further strengthen M-P Beck's national standing. In B-W, a strong CDU performance could enable M-P Oettinger to step out of the shadow of his long-serving predecessor Erwin Teufel and gain national visibility. END
COMMENT.

BODDE